

100-year-old mill named to historic register

Call staff

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WOONSOCKET -- The National Park Service has added the Jules Desurmont Worsted Mill of Woonsocket to the National Register of Historic Places, announced Frederick C. Williamson, chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission.

Jenny Fields, Matt Kierstead and Alyssa Woods of the Public Archaeology Library in Pawtucket nominated the mill for the register. The property is owned by Portola Tech International, which manufactures small plastic containers at the site.

The mill complex, built between 1907 and 1925, is located on a 6.4-acre lot on Fairmount Street. It includes of a four-story main mill building, a one-story office and storehouse building, and a one-story guardhouse.

All of the buildings have flat roofs, brick-clad reinforced concrete walls with concrete foundations and simple brick, concrete or granite trim. Architectural elements include pier-and-spandrel walls with consistent, full-width, segmental arch or rectangular window openings, brick corbelling near cornices and protruding sills.

The Desurmont Mill was built for the production of worsted yarn, which is made from long woolen fibers and woven into a smooth fabric used for the manufacture of suits and coats.

According to the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, worsted production began in the late 19th century in Woonsocket and rapidly expanded due to the efforts of Mayor Aram J. Pothier, who later became governor. At the Paris Trade Expositions of 1889 and 1900, Pothier attracted Belgian and French investment to Woonsocket.

Among the worsted companies that Pothier lured to Woonsocket was the Jules Desurmont and Fils Co. of Tourcoing, France. In 1907, Jules and Georges Desurmont hired the firm of J.W. Bishop Co. to build their new mill. The Jules Desurmont Worsted Co. officially incorporated on February 12, 1909, according to the commission.

The company produced worsted and merino yarns and sold the yarn to outside finishing works, including manufacturers of suits, knitting and plush products. By 1910, Jules Desurmont employed 346 people at the mill. By 1930, 625 employees produced 70,000 pounds of yarn per week.

The company distributed products in the national market through sales agencies in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago.

According to the commission, the company constructed a four-story, reinforced concrete loft addition to the mill around 1925. The company also added a one-story, reinforced concrete building to the north side of the office building in 1925.

According to the commission, Desurmont changed the name of the company to the Riverside Worsted Co. and sold the property to the Fairmount Realty Corp. in 1935. The Riverside Worsted Co. gained title to the property in 1939 and operated the company until 1952.

Between 1953 and the early 1970s, multiple small textile businesses occupied the complex, including the Bonte Spinning Co., Famb Knitting Co., Enterprise Dye Works, Frank A. Murphy Co., Kane Knitting Mills, Yorkshire Worsted Mills, Wanskuck Mill Textile Manufacturers, B.B. Textile Inc., G and L Trading Corp., Newell Mfg., Bristol Fabrics of Rhode Island Inc., Stadium Waste Sales Corp. and the Roger Development Corp. The property was later sold to the American Luggage Works Inc., which was later known as American Tourister.

The national register is the federal government's official list of properties throughout the United States, which has historical and architectural significance that makes them worthy of preservation. Listing on the national register provides special consideration during the planning of federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for state preservation grants for historic rehabilitation projects.

Owners of private property listed on the register are free to maintain, manage or dispose of their property.

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